



Dr. Hill's head about to be freed from his body with the help of a well aimed shovel blade.

Literary

By David Everitt

ZOMBIES

One of *The Re-Animator's* screenwriters explains how H.P. Lovecraft's living corpses were brought from page to screen.

The stories of H.P. Lovecraft have not fared too well on screen. Roger Corman's *The Haunted Palace* (1963) was a good, creepy adaptation of "The Case of Charles Dexter Ward," but *Die, Monster, Die!* (1965)—despite one of the all-time great exploitation titles—was strictly routine, as was *The Dunwich Horror* (1969), while *The Shuttered Room* (1967) was nothing more than a long build-up to an anticlimax. For 15 years after the release of *The Dunwich Horror*, no Lovecraft films were made at all. But now *The Re-Animator* has come along to show how exciting, horrifying and outrageous a Lovecraft movie can be. If this Empire Pictures release attracts enough business, it could prove to be the first of a series of adapta-

tions of the great horror author's stories.

When thinking of the sort of person who would have written a movie as bloody and outlandish as *The Re-Animator*, one might not immediately think of someone who teaches literature at a New York college but that's exactly what co-screenwriter Dennis Paoli does for a living when not working on film scripts. Paoli has worked on and off with *Re-Animator* director Stuart Gordon since their high school days in Chicago, collaborating on projects that have ranged from comedy skits to a stage version of the hero epic *Beowulf*. By the time Gordon and William Norris contacted Paoli about the idea of collaborating on a Lovecraft script, Paoli's academic pursuits had primed him for a venture into the

bizarre.

Paoli says that he was originally brought onto the project as "the Gothic consultant," because at the time he was working on his PhD in 18th and 19th century Gothic fiction. Paoli found that his knowledge of this style of literature could be applied to the task of adapting that latter-day Gothic H.P. Lovecraft. "The Gothics," Paoli says, "were the first kind of novels written. It's very strange what's happened to them. On the one hand, when you say Gothics you think of these current formula romances, but in their time, the first Gothics were the experimental novels. They would try anything to tell a story. They strove for effect, to have an immediate and violent effect on the reader. So they were banned in



Herbert West slows down his first re-animated corpse (Peter Kent) with a drill through the chest.

many places. In the House of Commons in England they called for a stop to romances, especially Gothic romances, because they were believed to be corruptive—just the same argument you get today."

The Gothic-style source material for *The Re-Animator* was a series of six grisly stories by Lovecraft revolving around the mad scientist Herbert West. In a quest to conquer death, West concocts a serum that can re-animate dead bodies. The serum produces macabre results and West spends six stories refining his ghastly experiment.

At first *The Re-Animator* was envisioned as a series of 13 half-hour episodes to be produced for either syndicated or cable TV. Once an outline was drawn up, Paoli says that William Norris wrote the first half-hour pilot, but then the collaborators found that there seemed to be more interest in an hour show that might be included in an already existing anthology series. Paoli expanded the script to an hour, and then went on to expand it again to an hour-and-a-half when prospects arose to produce the story as a feature film.

Adapting Lovecraft to create a violent, Gothic effect on screen has its problems, says Paoli, which may account for the mediocrity of previous Lovecraft films. One problem, says Paoli, is that most of the author's stories were written in the first person; in the case of the Herbert West stories, the narrator is Dan Cain, West's reluctant assistant. "Most movies," explains Paoli, "aren't made that way. It's very difficult to get across the first-person point of view unless you use a lot of voice-over narration, but then that distances you from the screen. You don't get that immediate effect."

Another problem concerns the nature of Lovecraft's horror. "Lovecraft's people have seen something that has changed



The lively, headless Dr. Hill body sneaks up on Herbert West who is absorbed in a chat with the re-animated Dr. Hill head.

them, that has twisted them, that has ruined their lives or made them mad. In the stories, all you get is the reactions to the horror. You do get some descriptions, actually some quite vivid descriptions, but they're always made more vivid by your own imagination. On film, you have to show these horrifying things, these things that the narrators see which make them mad, and you're under the obligation, in a way, to make your audience mad. That is an awful obligation for a filmmaker." In the past this has been an area in which Lovecraft pictures have really fallen apart. Anyone who has been subjected to the endless psychedelic shots from the point of view of the monster in *The Dunwich Horror* can attest to that. In *The Re-Animator*, though, the graphic horror is displayed—in spades. "Because we have reached a period now where you can be explicit, it allowed us to show these bloody events without cutting away or suggesting them off-camera. You have to take that excessive route," adds Paoli.

This particular adaptation also involved compressing the material contained in six stories to a 90-minute, low-budget feature. Out of necessity, says Paoli, many things had to be left out. The original stories have an intriguing epic scope. West begins at Miskatonic University in Lovecraft's recurring New England town of Arkham. West's gruesome experiments lead to his expulsion from the school, and when he continues to dig up bodies for his re-animation work, he is then kicked out of Arkham. From there he goes to Europe during World War I to work as a medic, "which is a perfect place for him," comments Paoli with a wry smile. "That part is like M*A*S*H, only horrifying. And I'm smiling about it. There's something funny about that. The humor in the movie comes from that kind of excessiveness."

This macabre sense of humor is one of the things that makes *The Re-Animator* so distinctive. Paoli feels that the black, bloody comedy grows naturally out of the story's characters, particularly the obsessed Herbert West. "No matter how excessive things get," he points out, "it's never excessive to Herbert. None of that matters to him. He knows exactly what he wants to do: He wants to continue with his experiments and he wants his bodies fresh—and that's all that counts. Something about the way he rationalizes all of these horrifying deeds in an almost sane way is totally insane. When you see a character not reacting to the horror and the gore in a way that you would, it's strange, and it's so strange it's funny."

The grotesque humor reaches its height when West decapitates his ruthless rival Dr. Hill and then proceeds to re-animate both the head and body, both of which carry on separately. "Sometimes you just have to let the characters go," says Paoli about this particularly wild



The zombified college dean (Robert Sampson) gets even with Dr. Hill's head, but the Hill body is no idle bystander.

section of the movie. "You shouldn't impose on them your ideas of what they should be. At some point the character will pop out and do whatever he or she would really do. When you find it, you know it's right, and you can't fight it. You can go back and make them do something different, especially if the studio says, 'No, you can't do that.' But in this production, we could do that, and not feel obliged to rein the character back and say, 'No, Herbert, you can't go that far.' That's not the nature of Herbert West's character. Going far has no meaning for him. He's so goal oriented. That goal may be so far out that we would stop and turn and run, but not Herbert."

If there is one scene that the producers of this currently unrated film might feel obliged to cut out, it would be the infamous sex scene involving the leading lady and Dr. Hill's decapitated head. Can Paoli take credit for creating this scene? "I will," Paoli laughs. "I don't know if 'credit' is the word. I don't know what that ultimately will do for me."

The colorful characters in *The Re-Animator* not only account for the bizarre humor, but for something else that rarely occurs in current horror pictures: the opportunity for actors to give performances worthy of the great old horror stars, especially the performances of Jeffrey Combs as Herbert West, Robert Sampson as Dean Halsey and David Gale as Dr. Hill. Paoli feels that fans will get a chance to see more horror movies that allow that kind of acting. "Look at *Friday the 13th*," he explains, "the guy wears a hockey mask. It's real hard to act with a hockey mask on. In *Halloween* there was another masked killer. The idea in these

movies was that you were afraid of some implacable, characterless being that was stalking you and could not be turned away. There was no character behind the mask except Death. In *The Re-Animator* these people are characters. Since death is overcome in this movie, death is no longer the horror. The horror are these characters themselves. So we really had to find those characters and in finding them we were able to give the actors something to work with. And they just took off."

By the time you read this, *The Re-Animator* will most likely be making its way across the country in a careful, gradual releasing strategy aimed at attracting the right audience to this unusual horror film. In the meantime, what can the makers of this movie do for an encore? Paoli has already written another Lovecraft script for producer Brian Yuzna and director Stuart Gordon. The script is entitled *From Beyond* and it promises to be another offbeat mad scientist story, but this time involving to some extent the Lovecraft mythology about the Old Ones who had established a civilization on earth before the advent of humans.

Paoli says that the story concerns experiments of a Dr. Pretorius that allow us to see an alternate existence that is all around us. "You may see more than you want to see, more than it is good to see. The movie will have as many effects, I believe, as *Re-Animator*, if not more. Whereas in *The Re-Animator* it was a life and death struggle, here it is a life or death struggle, because once you cross beyond, that alternate environment can suck you up. And it is indeed an extremely hostile environment." ☠